

Book Review: Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure

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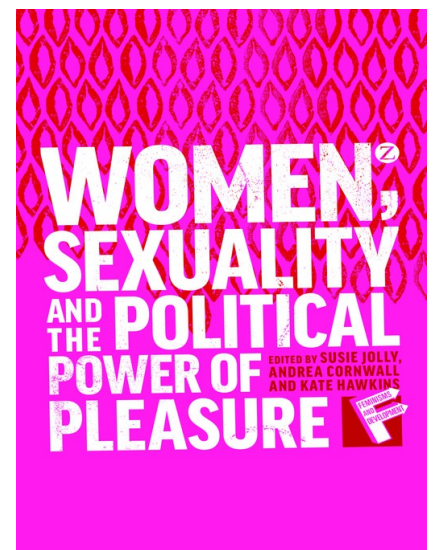
*This collection explores the ways in which positive, pleasure-focused approaches to sexuality can empower women, with examples of activism, advocacy and programming which use pleasure as a starting point. Covering topics such as gender and development, disability and sex, and human rights and relationships, **Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure** is a fresh and fascinating engagement with sex, sexuality, and politics, writes **Megan O'Branski**.*



Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure. Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall and Kate Hawkins (eds.). Zed Books. June 2013.

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Outside of academia, a good deal of discussion that takes place around female sexuality is largely negative. Women are assumed passive, victims, agential only in their (context-specific) ability to say “no”. Through newspapers, blogs, and social media, there has been a marked increase in engagement with and deconstruction of this canon, as men and women alike problematize issues that range from contraception to slut-shaming to the nature of consent. This is where contemporary feminism is beginning to operate, develop, and make its impact. *Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure* appears to spring straight from this real-time engagement with feminist critique, tackling the concerns of normative female sexuality from a perspective that is at once phenomenological and wholly accessible to readers outside the ivory tower. This book is comprised of fourteen chapters, exclusive of its introduction, the content of which range from sex work and pornography to sexuality in the context of development and laughter as a therapeutic tool for victims of sexual violence. It is an ideal read for anyone interested in gender in a variety of empirical contexts, and its readability makes it suitable for both undergraduate and postgraduate study.



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Every essay presented in this book makes its own original and considerable contribution; however, this review will focus upon two chapters. The seventh chapter of this book, entitled “Desires Denied: Sexual Pleasure in the Context of HIV”, moves the conversation to the normative expectations of sexuality in HIV-positive women. Welbourn contextualizes her argument with the foundational claim that “[f]orced sex and forced asexuality are opposite sides of the same coin: both are rooted in control over women and over our rights to choose what to do or not do with our bodies” (p.142). She argues that women diagnosed with HIV are expected to relinquish their rights to sexual pleasure (p.142), based on normative assumptions that begin in a Judeo-Christian “fear of uncontrolled women’s sexuality” (p.143) and are perpetuated through a Western judicial-medical matrix.

Welbourn makes a compelling and convincing argument for the ways in which HIV-positive women are denied their sexuality by tracing a fascinating line through religious texts and historical observations, all of which demonstrate the thoroughness with which the substance behind her claims were researched. Yet her essay derives its power from its emotive context, as Welbourn weaves her own experiences as an HIV-positive woman into her discussion. The use of autobiographical narrative in an academic piece is a tricky line to walk, as it will often cast doubt upon the author's ability to examine an issue objectively; however, in this case, the narrative experience of the subjects is deftly situated as the foundation of Welbourn's claims. She accomplishes two important tasks in this chapter: she problematizes the forced asexuality of women living with HIV, as well as bringing the emotive, emotional subject to the fore as a basis for academic inquiry. If feminism is so often accused of separating academic interpretation from the lived experience of women, "Desires Denied" is a triumphant rebuttal against this claim.

The ninth chapter, entitled "Why We Need To think About Sexuality and Sexual Well-Being: Addressing Sexual Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa", provides an interesting examination of the ways in which sexual violence is addressed – or not addressed – by service providers across multiple sectors. Undie calls for an increased engagement with sexual well-being, even or perhaps particularly in the context of sexual violence, on the part of service providers. She argues that focusing upon sexuality and sexual well-being demonstrates to the victim that "[t]here is life after sexual violence" (p.191), which she concludes is empowering for victims of violence and gives them space to make decisions with regards to their sexuality "that are neither born of, nor shaped by, the scars of their past experience" (p.191). One of the main tenets of Undie's chapter is that the silence around issues of sexual assault, in particular sexual assaults that do not fit the stereotypical male aggressor/female victim model "provid[es] fertile ground for these forms of violence to flourish" (p.191). She argues that this silence and the related silence surrounding sexuality and sexual well-being "can be held partly responsible for some of the sexual violence the African region has witnessed over the years" (p.190). This paradigm not only supports heteronormativity, but it puts up barriers for victims of "atypical" sexual violence, such as men, who may require support or care.

While I support Undie's assertion that emphasizing the reality that victims' lives, and indeed sex lives, can and do go on after violence, much of her essay struck me as overly optimistic. While the silence imposed upon victims of sexual violence that prevents them from reclaiming sexual agency after the event is harrowing and in desperate need of abolition, I was unconvinced by the assertion that discussions of sexual well-being could in and of themselves erase the subsequent trauma associated with sex. Furthermore, Undie focuses on sexual assault and rape as expressions of sexual desire on the part of the perpetrator, suggesting that educating would-be perpetrators of the benefits of giving sexual pleasure rather than pain would be an effective deterrent (p.193). This framework denies the idea of sexual assault as an assertion of power and dominance, which given Undie's empirical context of Sub-Saharan Africa, seemed a considerably problematic omission.

Overall, *Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure* is a fresh and fascinating engagement with sex, sexuality, and politics. Not included in this review are two additional chapters worth highlighting: Philpott and Ferris's fascinating exploration of the application of the harm-reduction principle in response to pornography, which will intrigue any researcher or student who has engaged with harm-reduction as a response to the international drug trade, and Doezeema's eye-opening look at pleasure and the psychic denial of pleasure in the sex work industry.

Yet, as with any emergent literature, there are definite "kinks" within the analyses presented in this book. At times the authors can appear overly confident in the benefits of adding pleasure to the conversation, which can give it the appearance of universal salve for the violence of normative conceptualizations of female sexuality. That said, the contribution that *Women, Sexuality, and the Political Power of Pleasure* makes is considerable – it brings the lived experience of women as sexual beings back to the table, and its empirically rich approach grounds its feminist conceptualizations. This book is a useful jumping-off point for future feminist inquiry that wishes to remain grounded in both academic study and subjective, grass-roots experience.

Megan O'Branski is a third year PhD candidate in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University. She received her BA in Political Science from the University of Connecticut in 2009. Her research focuses on the intersection of performativity, gender, and the weaponization and brutalization of the body in ethnic violence. Further research interests include sexuality, security studies, and zombies. [Read more reviews by Megan.](#)

